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African Parliamentary Union

Issue brief

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Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Africa

Introduction

The fight to achieve the full and effective participation of women in decision-making positions on an equal footing with men is making slow progress. Women still only account for **25.6 per cent** of parliamentarians worldwide¹ and continue to face many obstacles to discourage or remove them from political life.

Among those obstacles, violence against women in politics is one of the most devastating. It is a violation of the human and political rights of women, with long-lasting and harmful effects on those affected, on democratic processes and on political institutions, as well as on society as a whole.

The work of the IPU on sexism and violence against women in parliaments has brought to light the nature and magnitude of this scourge, long invisible, which seeks to reduce women to silence and exclude them from political life.

The IPU conducted its first international survey in 2016 with participation from 55 female parliamentarians from 39 countries in five regions of the world.² It then launched a series of regional studies aiming to expand research and knowledge on the diverse forms of sexism and gender-based violence experienced by women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff in different regions of the world.

In 2018, a joint study carried out by the IPU and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)³ with participation from 123 women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 45 European countries confirmed that sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians was very widespread and existed, to varying degrees, in Europe as it did in all other regions of the world. This study demonstrated an alarming level of sexual and psychological harassment directed at women parliamentary staff in Europe.

The present regional study, the second in the series, focuses on parliaments in Africa and was carried out in partnership with the African Parliamentary Union (APU). It is based on confidential interviews conducted with 224 women parliamentarians and members of parliamentary staff from 50 countries and 1 subregional parliamentary assembly (see methodology of the study on page 25). The aim of the study is to enrich the documentation and knowledge available on violence against women in parliaments in Africa, taking into account their voices and realities in the local context of the continent. New data thus obtained can be compared with data from the two previous studies, helping to further fine-tune how we view and understand the problem. It is by improving our knowledge and recognizing these acts of violence that we can prevent and fight against them, while also combating the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators. Listening to women affected by violence and gathering their perspectives are also ways to ensure that the help and services available are appropriate and anchored in reality.

The collection, analysis and dissemination of data on sexism and gender-based violence in the parliamentary world will also play an awareness-raising role and contribute to the development of concrete actions to tackle abuse within parliaments and other political institutions. Parliaments, their leaders and all parliamentary staff will be able to access information on the implications and realities of the problem and will be encouraged to talk about it. Together, they can develop and implement solutions to make parliament a model institution and a workplace where women can fulfil their duties safely and on an equal footing with men.

Key points

- This study is based on interviews conducted with 224 women from 50 African countries (more than 90 per cent of countries in Africa), including 137 women parliamentarians and 87 female members of parliamentary staff.
- It reveals the scale on which acts of sexism, harassment and violence are being perpetrated against women in the parliamentary world in Africa. These are violations of fundamental rights, which contribute to the exclusion of women in political life.

Women parliamentarians

Prevalence

- **80 per cent** of women parliamentarians who participated in the study have experienced psychological violence over the course of their mandate:
 - **67 per cent** have been subject to sexist behaviour or remarks.

- **46 per cent** have been the target of sexist attacks online (internet, social media, smartphones).
- **42 per cent** have received death threats, rape threats or threats of beating or abduction directed at them or their loved ones.
- **39 per cent** have faced intimidation or psychological harassment.
- **39 per cent** have experienced sexual violence:
 - **40 per cent** have been sexually harassed.
 - **9 per cent** have been affected by sextortion (requests for sexual favours).
- **23 per cent** have experienced physical violence.
- **29 per cent** have been exposed to economic violence. (See definitions of the forms of violence on page 27).

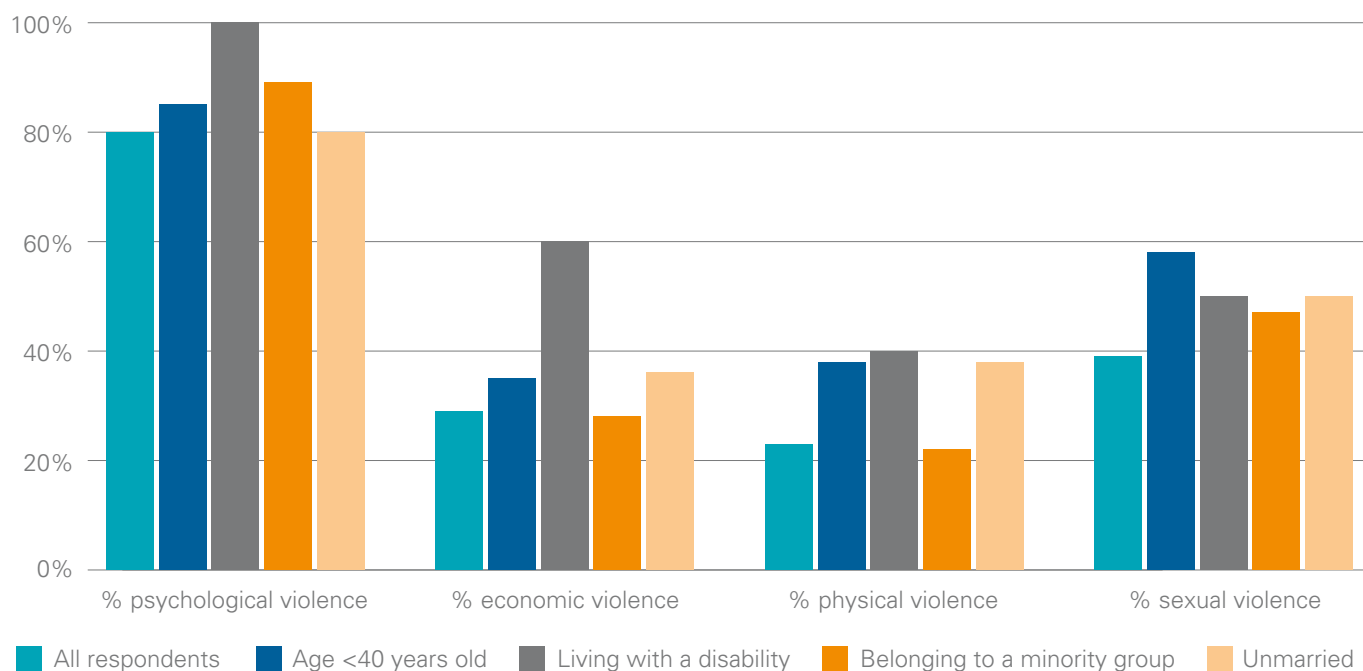
Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination

- Incidents of violence are more prevalent among women parliamentarians living with disabilities, young women under 40 years of age, unmarried women and women from minority groups. This shows that violence experienced by certain groups of women parliamentarians, manifesting in multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, can increase considerably depending on identity (Figure 1).
- Women parliamentarians from the political opposition in their countries are even more vulnerable to all forms of violence, as are those who speak out in support of women's rights or equality between men and women.

Perpetrators of violence⁴

- Male parliamentary colleagues are the primary perpetrators of all forms of violence affecting women parliamentarians,

Figure 1 – The intersectional nature of violence against women parliamentarians



Total number of respondents: 137

Total number of respondents by category: ■ 26 ■ 10 ■ 36 ■ 50

particularly sexual, physical and economic violence. Male colleagues from political parties opposing that of the respondent are in first place, followed closely by male colleagues from the same party. For example, acts of sexual harassment have been perpetrated by male colleagues from opposing political parties in **49 per cent of cases**, and from the same party in **41 per cent of cases**.

- The perpetrators of psychological violence can be many and various:
 - male parliamentary colleagues are responsible for **78 per cent** of sexist remarks or behaviour.
 - **44 per cent** of online sexist attacks can be attributed to members of the public or to anonymous people.
 - **30 per cent** of acts of intimidation are perpetrated by members of the public, particularly in the run-up to elections.
 - **52 per cent** of threats are made by citizens, militant groups, terrorist groups and, above all, anonymous people.

Places⁵

- Parliaments are directly concerned because the majority of the violence disclosed in this study took place on the premises of their institutions. This is the case for **83 per cent** of acts of sexual harassment, **78 per cent** of incidents of sexist behaviour and **40 per cent** of acts of physical violence reported by women parliamentarians.
- Other places where women parliamentarians experience violence include: electronic communication platforms (internet, social media, messengers), on the ground working in their constituencies and communities, and in their private lives.

Female parliamentary staff

Prevalence and perpetrators of violence

- **45 per cent** of the female parliamentary staff interviewed reported experiencing sexual harassment at work. The perpetrators of those acts were male parliamentarians (in **53 per cent of cases**) and male colleagues or parliamentary staff (in **48 per cent of cases**).
- **18 per cent** have received requests for sexual favours from parliamentary colleagues (**56 per cent of cases**) or from parliamentarians (**44 per cent of cases**) in exchange for a benefit that this colleague or parliamentarian was empowered to withhold or confer.
- **69 per cent** have experienced psychological violence:
 - **56 per cent** were the target of sexist remarks made by male colleagues working in parliament (**67 per cent of cases**) and parliamentarians (**30 per cent of cases**).
 - **38 per cent** of respondents reported having experienced psychological harassment/bullying within the context of their work in parliament. The perpetrators were parliamentary colleagues in **72 per cent of those cases** (mostly men but also some women) and male parliamentarians in **22 per cent of those cases**.
 - **22 per cent** were attacked online and **7 per cent** were threatened – by male parliamentary colleagues in more than a third of cases.

- Economic violence is also committed, in the majority of cases, by people in positions of authority with a view to carrying out and intensifying psychological abuse against female parliamentary staff: **18 per cent** of female parliamentary staff have been threatened with losing their job or with having their career progression blocked while **24 per cent** have been refused funds to which they were entitled, such as a salary or bonus.

Reporting

- Most often, women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff who have experienced violence do not talk about or report it (see tables III and IV on reporting) for the following reasons:
 - the institutional environment tolerates this type of behaviour or deems it unimportant.
 - the parliamentary mechanisms in place for reporting violence in confidence, lodging complaints, investigating or sanctioning perpetrators are non-existent, weak or not applied.
 - there is a fear of being blamed, having the truth of their allegations questioned or being accused of having provoked the harassment or violence themselves.
 - women parliamentarians are fearful of being put at even more risk, harming their political party or being seen to be disloyal.
 - parliamentary staff are aware of their subordinate position and fear losing their job or having their voice disregarded when confronting a parliamentarian or person of authority.

Effects

- Sexism, harassment and violence against women, whether parliamentarians or parliamentary staff, can cause psychological and physical wounds, and affect their health, and at times their ability to work.
- These acts also have the effect of creating a destabilizing, hostile, degrading, humiliating or abusive environment and perpetuating gender inequality.
- In addition, sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians deters women from entering politics and making a career in the field. It can harm their visibility and influence during their mandate which, in turn, impacts the quality and efficacy of their work in parliament and of democracy.

Solutions

- Solutions exist. Participants in the study recommend putting in place internal parliamentary policies to combat sexism, psychological harassment and sexual harassment. They highlighted the critical need for confidential spaces where victims can be listened to and advised as well as the need to create mechanisms for receiving and processing complaints that are independent, secure and fair. Training all people present in parliament on gender-based discrimination and violence is, according to participants, a necessary first step that will give everyone an information base and a basic understanding of the problem.

- Some African parliaments have begun taking appropriate measures to address this internal scourge. Their example can inspire other parliaments and encourage them to do everything possible to ensure that gender-based violence and harassment is no longer tolerated in the parliamentary world.

BOX 1: Context

The political, economic, social, cultural and religious contexts in which women parliamentarians live can influence the form, intensity and impact of the violence to which they are exposed. In their testimonies, respondents raised the following contextual factors as priorities:

- Social and cultural pressures (box 3, p. 15) which favour male power in society and translate into violations of the fundamental rights of women
- Poverty and economic difficulties, more widespread among women, with women having less access to work, especially decent work, but also paradoxically assuming most of the family responsibilities
- The high level of violence generally in their societies

What do these perceptions mean and where does the African continent fit globally in the fight to respect the rights of women and the pursuit of gender equality? Generally speaking, data from the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum showed that Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa are among the three regions in the world (along with South Asia) where the most progress remains to be made towards achieving equality between men and women.⁶ Indicators from the World Bank for 2021 on the way in which gender-based legal discrimination affects women's economic opportunities also place Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa among the three regions of the world (along with East Asia and the Pacific) where the gender gap in the law is the greatest.⁷

In 2020, regional differences observed in the level of physical or sexual violence in intimate relationships showed that Sub-Saharan Africa was one of the regions of the world where women were most exposed to these forms of violence – after Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and South Asia.⁸ According to the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, since 2018, Africa has had the highest number of conflict-related incidents of sexual violence.⁹ Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa also have the highest proportion of girls aged between 15 and 19 who have been subject to female genital mutilation (FGM/cutting) while Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest proportion of women aged between 20 and 24 who were married before the age of 15. Similarly, Sub-Saharan Africa holds the highest percentage of women in the world employed below the international poverty line, fixed at US\$ 1.90 per day.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it should be noted that a very slow but steady decline has been observed in recent years in the level of FGM and early marriage.

Extent of the problem and comparison with global and European data

Table I – Extent and nature of violence:

Prevalence of the different forms of violence experienced by the women parliamentarians interviewed

	Africa (2021)	Europe (2018)	World (2016)
Psychological violence	80%	85%	82%
Sexual violence	39%	25%	22%
Physical violence	23%	15%	25%
Economic violence	29%	14%	33%

When comparing the results obtained for Africa with the two previous IPU studies (a global study in 2016 and a European study in 2018), it can be observed that the percentages denoting psychological violence perpetrated against women parliamentarians are similar across the three studies. Europe has a slightly higher rate which can be explained by the higher percentage of online attacks declared for this region (**58 per cent** of participants in Europe versus **46 per cent** in Africa), a difference probably attributable, at least partially, to the great disparities in women's access to the internet between these two regions. In Africa, access to the internet for women is, in fact, the lowest in the world (20%), while in Europe it is the highest (81%).¹¹

- That said, akin to the situation observed in the previous global and European studies, online communications are also the main means by which death or rape threats are made against women parliamentarians in Africa.
- The level of physical and economic violence against women parliamentarians uncovered by the African study is markedly similar to the global study, with a few percentage points less in Africa.
- However, the level of sexual violence against women parliamentarians in Africa is considerably higher than in Europe (+14 percentage points) and in the world (+17 percentage points).
- The political, economic, social, cultural and religious contexts in which women parliamentarians live can probably explain the fact that the results for physical, sexual and economic violence are higher in Africa than in Europe (see box 1 for background information related to these acts of violence).

Table II – Extent and nature of violence:

Prevalence of the different forms of violence experienced by the female parliamentary staff interviewed

	Africa (2021)	Europe (2018)
Psychological violence	69%	52%
Sexual violence	46%	41%
Physical violence	6%	7%
Economic violence	34%	10%

N.B.: Global data are not available.

- The percentages denoting economic and psychological violence experienced by female parliamentary staff in Africa are considerably higher than in Europe. The percentage denoting sexual violence is also higher than in Europe, but only by 5 per cent. The percentage denoting physical violence is somewhat similar.

Reporting violence

Both in Africa and in Europe, women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff who have experienced violence mostly do not report it. The reasons why are very similar.

Table III – Reporting by women parliamentarians

Women parliamentarians who...	Africa	Europe
have been subject to sexist remarks and have reported them to the authorities of their parliament or political party	13%	18%
have been the target of intimidation and have reported it to the authorities of their parliament	32%	27%
have been threatened and have reported it to the police	48%	50%
have been subject to online sexist attacks and have reported them to the police, to online platform officials or to a tribunal	24%	33%
have been slapped, pushed or hit and have reported it to the police or to the authorities of their political party	27%	22%
have been victims of physical violence committed using a weapon and have reported it to the police	57%	100%
have been sexually harassed and have told the authorities of their parliament	7%	24%
have been sexually assaulted and have reported it to the authorities of their parliament or have sought support from a feminist organization	38%	0%

- In both regions, women parliamentarians who have been assaulted tend to report physical violence (particularly assaults committed using a weapon) and threats to their physical integrity more often. This is probably because these acts are better recognized in national criminal law and because of the perception that physical violence causes more suffering to victims.
- Women parliamentarians in Africa who have been sexually assaulted, intimidated or psychologically harassed reported these acts more often than their European colleagues.
- The acts reported least often by women parliamentarians in Africa are online sexist attacks, sexist remarks and, above all, sexual harassment (which does not necessarily imply physical contact, contrary to sexual assault).

Table IV – Reporting by female parliamentary staff

Female parliamentary staff who...	Africa	Europe
have been subject to sexist remarks and have reported them to the authorities of their parliament	14%	19%
have been the target of moral harassment and have reported it to the authorities of their parliament	12%	63%
have been slapped, pushed or hit and have reported it to the authorities of their parliament	33%	33%
have been sexually harassed and have told the authorities of their parliament	13%	6%
have been sexually assaulted and have reported it to the authorities of their parliament	25%	No cases

- Although the reporting rate for physical violence is similar in the two regions, the reporting rate for sexual harassment experienced by parliamentary staff in Africa – while still very low – is nevertheless slightly higher than in Europe.
- However, the reporting rate for psychological harassment/ bullying is considerably higher in Europe. It seems that, in Europe, this form of workplace harassment is better recognized and more readily considered in parliamentary staff regulations or, more generally, in national legislation. According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Europe and Central Asia have the highest number of countries with legislation covering psychological violence and harassment at work, with other regions, including Africa, lagging behind.¹² According to the same study, the disparities between Africa, America and Asia-Pacific on the one hand, and Europe and Central Asia on the other, are less pronounced in the regional breakdown of countries with legislation on workplace sexual harassment.

Normative framework

Several human rights instruments commit States and the international community to promoting and protecting the right of women to live a life free from violence and to participate fully in political life.

The right to a life free from violence

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) provides States with the first recognized definition of this type of violence as well as a plan of action.¹³

As regards Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol, 2003) takes the UN definition and adds the concept of economic violence, specifying that this type of violence can be perpetrated in peace time and in times of conflict or war. The Protocol reads:

“Violence against women” means all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war.¹⁴

The Protocol commits African States to taking appropriate and effective measures towards eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women. It sets out the different types of aggressions committed against women and highlights the close and ongoing links between them (continuum of violence). It also establishes a typology that has been adopted by this study: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and economic violence (see definitions, p. 27).

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women highlights the causes of violence committed against women and stresses that these acts are gender-based because they are “rooted in gender-related factors such as the ideology of men’s entitlement and privilege over women, social norms regarding masculinity, and the need to assert male control or power, enforce gender roles, or prevent, discourage or punish what is considered to be unacceptable female behaviour. These factors also contribute to the explicit or implicit social acceptance of gender-based violence against women.”¹⁵

By ratifying the Maputo Protocol and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), States commit to preventing, examining and sanctioning all acts of violence committed against women in all areas, including in the parliamentary and political arena. They are also required to repeal all gender-discriminatory laws as well as to harmonize religious norms, customs and “provisions based on discriminatory or stereotypical attitudes or practices which allow for gender-based violence against women or mitigate sentences in this context.”¹⁶

What is violence against women in politics and what are the normative references?

Although, in politics, both women and men are exposed to violence, the acts of violence committed against women can be gender-based, that is, directed towards women because of their gender “to discourage women from being politically active and exercising their human rights and to influence, restrict or prevent the political participation of individual women and women as a group.”¹⁷

These fundamental rights, essential to achieving gender equality, are enshrined in several international instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (SDGs, Goal 5), States have reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring the full and effective political participation of women at all levels of decision-making. In Africa, the Maputo Protocol requires the parties to ensure the

participation of women in political processes and in decision-making (article 9). In particular, it requires the parties to ensure that “women are represented equally at all levels with men in all electoral processes” and that they are “equal partners with men at all levels of development and implementation of State policies and development programmes.”¹⁸

In politics, it is possible to differentiate between two types of violence: political violence, which is directed at political actors both male and female, and violence against women in politics, which is directed specifically at women as a group with the objective of ejecting them from the political arena. For women in politics, these two types of violence can at times overlap and intersect,¹⁹ as we will see further on in this study.

These two types of violence are both violations of personal integrity and political rights, which, in turn, jeopardize democracy and human rights. However, violence against women in politics is also a threat to gender equality. Although often hidden, the denigration of women has had a permeating influence on the origins, manifestations and consequences of violence against women in politics and is an underlying cause as to why women’s exclusion from politics is legitimized and normalized.²⁰

International visibility and recognition of violence against women in politics have increased in recent years. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences produced a report on the matter which was presented to the United Nations General Assembly in October 2018. In the report, she urges States to fight against impunity for violence against women in politics and encourages national parliaments in particular to take the following measures:

- a) Adopt new legislation or adapt existing legislation to protect women in politics against violence and use oversight powers to ensure its strict implementation;
- b) Adopt new codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or revise existing ones, stating clearly the zero tolerance of parliament for sexual harassment, intimidation and any other form of violence against women in politics;
- c) Conduct surveys and public debates periodically to raise awareness of the issue of violence against women in politics and the crucial role that male parliamentarians can play in preventing violence against women in politics;
- d) Address the impunity of members of parliament with regard to violence against women in politics and examine immunity rules that should not, by any means, protect the perpetrators of such violence.”²¹

A few months later, in an important resolution responding to the #MeToo movement, the United Nations General Assembly expressed concern “about all acts of violence, including sexual harassment, against women and girls involved in political and public life.” The resolution calls on national legislative authorities and political parties to “adopt codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or revise existing ones, stating zero tolerance [...] for sexual harassment, intimidation and any other form of violence against women in politics.”²²

At the parliamentary level, the IPU, at its 135th Assembly in 2016, adopted a resolution entitled *The freedom of women*

to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective. This resolution addresses the issue of violence against women in politics and makes specific recommendations urging parliaments to do the following:

- adopt and apply laws combating this type of violence, including violence committed online
- have strong and well-implemented internal policies against sexist language and attitudes as well as against sexual harassment, putting in place effective complaints mechanisms and sanctions against perpetrators
- ensure that parliamentary institutions are gender-sensitive, that is, able to respond to the needs and interests of both women and men in their structures, internal regulations, operations, methods and work.²³

In addition, the adoption of ILO Convention No. 190 in June 2019 introduced new international standards that led to unprecedented progress and created a common framework to prevent, combat and eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and harassment.²⁴ The Convention recognizes that “Women are particularly vulnerable to violence and harassment in the world of work.” It calls on Member States to adopt measures that take into account and address “the related underlying causes, such as multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, unequal gender-based power relations, gender stereotypes, and gender, social and cultural norms that support violence and harassment.”²⁵

African States as a bloc have supported the adoption of this Convention and contributed to ensuring that the scope of its protection is widespread and inclusive.²⁶ The Convention makes some key and pioneering contributions to the fight to eliminate violence against women in politics, particularly in parliaments.

Above all, the Convention assumes that it is not possible to provide adequate protection by focusing solely on the physical workplace in the classical sense, and instead addresses violence and harassment in the “world of work,” a concept that encompasses public and private spaces being used as a workplace, work-related trips, training and events as well as work-related communications, including online (internet, telephone, social networks), amongst other things. Therefore, the Convention recognizes parliament as a workplace that is not limited to the parliament building. Furthermore, the Convention protects workers and other people in the world of work, whatever their contractual status.²⁷ It thus resolves any ambiguities concerning parliament as a workplace by covering all categories of people working in parliament, including parliamentarians, parliamentary employees, parliamentary assistants and other people, such as security personnel, chauffeurs, assistants working for political parties or groups, interns, etc.²⁸

In 2019, the IPU published some guidelines on how to combat sexual harassment and violence against women in parliament.²⁹ This document provides parliaments and parliamentary staff with advice and practical information on ways to make parliament gender-sensitive and free from sexism and violence. It also sets out many examples of good practices from parliaments all over the world.³⁰

Thus, by applying the instruments to which States have committed, responding to political appeals and using the tools at their disposal, parliaments should make every effort to ensure that gender-based violence and harassment is no longer tolerated in the parliamentary world and to find appropriate solutions. In doing so, parliaments will be better placed to implement gender equality in their work with a view to eliminating violence against women and girls in all areas of life, both public and private.

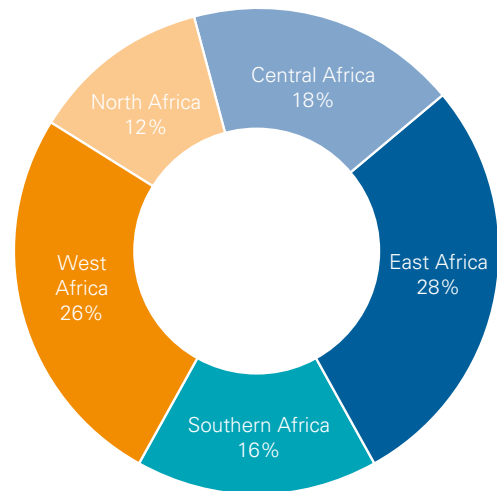
The experience of women parliamentarians

Participation in the survey

On 1 January 2020, the number of women parliamentarians on the African continent stood at 2,834 out of a total of 12,113 parliamentarians, resulting in a representation of women of **23 per cent**.³¹ This puts Africa in third place globally, behind America and Europe.³²

A total of **137** women parliamentarians participated in the study. They represent the parliaments of **49** countries and 1 subregional parliamentary assembly (East African Legislative Assembly). They make up 5 per cent of the 2,834 women parliamentarians working in Africa and come from five of the continent’s subregions (figure 2).

Figure II – Breakdown by region of women parliamentarians who participated in the survey



A total of **84 per cent** belong to a political party, of which **64 per cent** is a majority party and **33 per cent** is an opposition party.

They are of all ages (table V), with **19 per cent** being young parliamentarians under 40 years old.

A total of **28 per cent** reported belonging to a minority group in their country and **7 per cent** said that they had a disability.

A total of **63 per cent** are married, **15 per cent** are single and **21 per cent** are divorced or widowed.

Table V – Age of women parliamentarians interviewed

Age of respondents	Percentage
18–30 years old	3%
31–40 years old	16%
41–45 years old	10%
46–50 years old	13%
51–60 years old	35%
61–70 years old	22%
71–80 years old	2%

Psychological violence

Psychological violence includes all gestures, acts, speech, writing or images that damage the psychological integrity of a person or group of people and that serve to weaken or hurt the person psychologically as well as to subjugate or control them.

Eighty per cent of women parliamentarians who participated in the survey reported experiencing psychological violence over the course of their mandate.

For the purposes of this study, psychological violence has been classified into five types: sexist remarks and attitudes, publication of degrading images or comments in the traditional media (newspaper, radio, television), intimidation, threats, and online sexist attacks. It has been examined on the basis of the following questions:

In the course of your parliamentary term of office:

Have you ever been the subject of sexist behaviour or remarks?

Have you ever been aware of newspapers or the television publishing or broadcasting pictures of you or comments about you that were highly disparaging, or which had a sexual connotation?

Have you ever been psychologically harassed or exposed to persistent and intimidating behaviour, such as unwelcome attention or verbal contacts, or any form of interaction that frightened you?

Have you ever received threats of harm to you and/or those close to you (members of your family, friends, etc.)?

Have you ever been the target of online sexist attacks (internet, social media, smartphones)?

Sexist attitudes and remarks³³

A total of **67 per cent** of the parliamentarians interviewed reported being repeatedly subject to sexist remarks and attitudes over the course of their parliamentary mandates. These incidents took place on the premises of parliament in **78 per cent** of cases, during political meetings (**31 per cent of cases**) and on social media (**24 per cent of cases**). The perpetrators are primarily male colleagues from political parties opposing that of the person interviewed (**43%**) or colleagues from the same party (**33%**).

Generally speaking, women parliamentarians who took part in the survey believe that the main message

conveyed by these sexist remarks is a desire to eject women from political life. Many women deplore the way in which their male colleagues heckle them. Their male colleagues claim that politics is a domain reserved for men, that women are not welcome there or that they are unfit to take part. This main message is based on a series of negative stereotypes, insults and practices aiming to ignore, diminish, ridicule and degrade women in politics or to judge their physical appearance.

Box 2 presents some examples of tactics cited by respondents aiming to deny the political existence of women or to constantly question their abilities for the sole reason that they are women.

The media can also pass on these messages, thus helping to normalize women's exclusion from the world of politics and to legitimize gender inequality. Indeed, **25 per cent** of participants reported that the media had distributed images or comments about them that were derogatory or sexual in nature.

There are also the sexual remarks to which participants have been subjected as well as the violations of their private space and attacks on their physical integrity (touching, staring etc.). These are revealing of sexual harassment and are addressed further on.

BOX 2: The tactics used against women

Denying their political existence

Symbolically blocking access to the political space

Respondents drew attention to many different remarks. The remarks reflect the traditions and customs in place preventing women from investing in the political space, and suggest that a woman's place is in the home, in the kitchen, next to her husband, and having and raising the children. The public remarks made by male colleagues as reported by the participants seek to symbolically block women's access to the political space. This is in complete contrast to the legislation in force which recognizes the political rights of women.

"Women cannot come here and be elected to this post."

"You women belong in bed and in the kitchen!"

"You are nothing but a woman, you could never be president. You must understand that it is not possible for a woman."

"No way can these women be elected, they've already had one mandate, that's enough!"

Some of the remarks attack women and attack the measures in place to encourage their participation in politics. One respondent noted: *"They rally against the quota for 25 per cent women saying: 'Now you will be in the majority!' If the quota law did not exist, they would prevent women from standing in elections!"*

Ignoring or making invisible

Women parliamentarians are often perceived in African society and in the world at large as having "invaded" what is considered the "turf" of men. One participant said:

“Men see women as threats. They say: ‘You are taking our space.’” In turn, their identity as women leaders is ignored or questioned in many different ways. Some survey participants provided the example of calling meetings with male colleagues, military personnel and traditional leaders who then ignore the invitation and do not turn up.

“Men colleagues from my party ignored me and did not come to the meetings that I called.”

“I had some problems with military personnel who did not want to do as I said or come to the meetings I called because I am a woman.”

Reducing to silence

Speaking in public is often considered an act reserved for men. Sometimes, the very fact that a woman has spoken in public is considered a transgression. The respondents explained how they have been refused the right to speak in order to make their point of view invisible and to ensure they are not recognized as equals in politics.

“They thought of me as a young girl who had been newly elected. The president of the committee to which I belonged did not let me speak when I raised my hand; nor did he take into account what I said.”

“You raise your hand, and nobody sees you. Sometimes you feel you made a good point, but nobody listens to you. You have to explain and assert more than a man.”

Not listening

When a woman speaks, another way to erase her contribution is to reduce the likelihood of her being heard.

“Men often make noise, talking loudly or leaving the assembly room when a female colleague or I speak. This gives the impression of being pushed into the background in the assembly room and elsewhere in political life.”

“Men miss sessions when it comes to female issues, or they speak on the phone to show that they don’t care.”

Interrupting

Another tactic consists of intrusively interrupting a woman who is speaking in a way that asserts dominance over her or destroys her credibility and authority.

“When you present a motion, they overlook you: ‘You’re female, you’re thinking with your emotions.’”

“A male colleague said about me: ‘Look how romantic she is; when I was talking about fighting poverty or road building!’”

Questioning their abilities

Other tactics attempt to show that women, as a group, are not made to be political leaders. One survey participant said: *“There is a majority of men who do not consider us, even for issues related to women. They consider we are not able to represent a constituency, that we are inferior.”*

Discrediting

Many respondents have been subject to remarks based on negative stereotypes which question whether women have the moral, human and intellectual capacities necessary to be in politics.

“Parliament needs a man, a strong person. You need strength or brain.”

“Women don’t have money, don’t vote for her.”

“Women are busy shopping and getting plastic surgery,” accusation made by male MPs on TV.

Treating women as sex objects

Sometimes, a woman parliamentarian is reduced to an object of sexual desire, with only her body, her physical appearance or the fact that she is physically and sexually attractive being taken into account.

“Jokes that make you feel uneasy. Comments like ‘where are you going with that nice butt?’”

“They talk about your physical appearance. When it comes to fighting women, men are as one. They say: ‘Women can only do two things in parliament: wear perfume and carry handbags.’”

Online sexist attacks

The internet and digital spaces hosting direct networks of communication are effective tools that women can use in politics and in public life to increase their visibility, disseminate their ideas and interact with the public. However, technology also exposes many women and girls worldwide to different forms of sexist violence.³⁴ By allowing malicious content to spread rapidly (or go “viral”), be reproduced and be made visible on social networks, “technology has transformed many forms of gender-based violence into something that can be perpetrated across distance, without physical contact and beyond borders through the use of anonymous profiles to amplify the harm to victims.”³⁵ The phenomenon is at times aggravated by the actions of “trolls” and “bots” that spread misleading or inaccurate information and images of women who take part in political or public life (what we call “gendered disinformation”). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation given the increased use of social media and videoconference platforms. Thus far, these attacks have often gone unpunished because the owners of these platforms do not react or enforce sanctions and because of the absence of an adequate, well-applied judicial framework.

The study found that **46 per cent** of women parliamentarians who participated have been the target of sexist aggressions online (internet, social media, messengers). The respondents reported that these aggressions were carried out by political opponents (in **39 per cent of cases**), voters (in **20 per cent of cases**) and anonymous people (in **24 per cent of cases**). The main tactics used against women parliamentarians online are as follows: spreading false information, making threats, using profanities or hate speech and attacking their image. The aggressions most often target their body, sexuality or reputation.

Their purpose or effect is to silence the women on social media as well as in other public spaces, both online and offline, and ultimately to make them withdraw from political life.

As the online attacks are seen by the general public (particularly by the younger generations), they weaken the power of women leaders who are role models helping to break down barriers for other women. It sends a negative message to young women ("see what you will be exposed to if you become leaders in your community!"). As such, violence against women in politics, particularly online, "deprive(s) young girls of the opportunity to dream of a world where women can be at the top."³⁶

"It's negative propaganda. It was said that I had an affair with our leader. It haunted me. I was labelled. It was in the newspaper. I took it to court and won."

"They have threatened me on social media saying that they have a sex tape of mine. They insult me and say they'll harass me until I commit suicide. I'm thinking of reporting it. I'm scared."

"A smear campaign has been going on where they stole my identity and made me use indecent language."

Psychological harassment, intimidation and threats

A total of **39 per cent** of respondents reported being subject to persistent and intimidating behaviour that could harm their psychological integrity or emotional well-being.

These acts of intimidation took place in parliament in the form of verbal attacks and virulent insults but also during electoral campaigns and political meetings in the form of aggressions and threats perpetrated by groups of young military personnel, among others, and ordered by political opponents with the objective of discouraging women from speaking or from standing in elections. Survey participants also reported having been tracked by a group of men or ambushed by individuals who wanted to target them. Some attested that gunshots were fired into the air during one of their political meetings to wreak havoc and frighten them. One respondent was threatened after she opposed the fact that the men from her political party were taking all the decisions amongst themselves to the exclusion of women. One parliamentarian received threats of burning her house down and another of sabotaging her political meetings. Some participants also reported being subjected to acts of online intimidation, including slander, hate speech and the spreading of disinformation.

In **41 per cent of cases**, these acts of violence were committed by male colleagues or co-workers from political parties opposing that of the respondent. In **30 per cent of cases**, they were committed by members of the public, mostly men, but also some women. Incidents of psychological harassment committed by colleagues from the same political party as the respondent made up **23 per cent of cases**.

"By custom, women don't have the right to stand in elections; a woman in politics is poorly regarded. During the election campaign, in a village, people attacked my caravan."

"A political opponent sent people after me to frighten me. The same tactic was used against a colleague who could no longer hold meetings because of the havoc wreaked by her opponent. She was discouraged and decided to withdraw from elections."

"I received messages from a marabout who had been asked to eliminate me."

"You will never come back to parliament; we don't want a woman to represent us."

"Be careful what you do or you'll regret it."

Whether verbal attacks or physical intimidation, the tactics used by abusers to frighten and cause stress often come in the form of death threats, rape threats, threats of beating or threats of abduction. A total of **42 per cent** of participants reported experiencing threats of this nature aimed either at themselves or at their loved ones.

Respondents reported that the majority of threats (**52%**) were made by voters, groups of military personnel, terrorist groups or anonymous people, while **29 per cent** could be attributed to colleagues from opposing parties and **15 per cent** to colleagues of the same party.

Although electronic means, including social media, email and telephone, are the preferred way of threatening women parliamentarians (**35 per cent of cases**), women parliamentarians also receive a great number of threats in their private lives, their constituency bureaus and on the ground in their own communities.

"I received death threats via Facebook. It was a terrifying time. I could not leave my home."

"I received messages such as: 'we are going to shoot you in the head. You will not complete your mandate, you will die, you'll see.'"

Physical violence

Physical violence includes a wide spectrum of physical injuries and constitutes a threat to the life or bodily integrity of the target or to their loved ones. A total of **23 per cent** of respondents reported experiencing physical violence during their mandate.

In this study, physical violence was examined based on the following questions:

In the course of your parliamentary term of office:

- Has anyone ever slapped, pushed or hit you or thrown something at you which could have hurt you?
- Has anyone ever threatened to use or actually used a firearm, knife or any other weapon against you?
- Have you ever been beaten, held captive or abducted?

Sixteen per cent of respondents reported being slapped, pushed, or hit or having had something thrown at them. **Ten per cent** reported that someone had threatened to use or had

used a firearm, knife or other weapon against them. **Three per cent** reported being held captive, abducted or beaten.

In **40 per cent of cases**, physical violence perpetrated in parliament consists of women parliamentarians being shoved and hit. In **39 per cent of cases**, the aggressors are male colleagues from political parties opposing that of the respondent. Some parliamentarians attested that some male colleagues had shoved them away to prevent them from entering the assembly room, and others said that they had been pushed because a colleague had wanted to get them out forcefully.

"I witnessed a brawl in plenary where a male Member of Parliament hit a female colleague."

"At the time of assigning positions of responsibility at the Assembly, a colleague from my party shoved and threatened to hit me. Another colleague managed to get him under control."

"During a debate, I was talking about rape and attacked by a man who grabbed my t-shirt."

"A female senator was threatened in the assembly room by a man armed with a knife and the men all around did not help her. A security agent was the only one who tried to prevent the aggressor from killing her."

These data and testimonies are also a symptom of the larger problems related to security and violence in some African parliaments. They resemble other incidents already in the public domain, such as the incident in which a Tunisian parliamentarian was verbally and physically assaulted by her parliamentary colleagues right in the middle of the assembly room in 2020 and 2021,³⁷ or the incident in which a Kenyan Member of Parliament was slapped twice by a colleague while Parliament was in session in 2019.³⁸

These observations underline the need to implement measures that maintain and uphold order during parliamentary activities as well as the need to create a work environment that defends and protects the rights of all parliamentarians, women and men, including members of the opposition, with favourable conditions in place for parliamentarians to fulfil and exercise their mandate.

Data from the study suggest that other cases of physical violence were committed outside parliament, during political meetings and election campaigns, by unknown individuals and young people instructed by political opponents or terrorist groups.

"They tried to abduct me. Gunshots were fired at my car during an election campaign. One person died but the attempted abduction failed."

"They threw stones at my window and my car was vandalized twice."

It can also be noted that around one third of all physical violence cases reported by respondents took place in their private lives.

The testimonies suggest that some of these cases are cases of domestic violence exacerbated by women's participation in political life.

"My husband became violent and started to hit me when I was elected to the Assembly."

"My husband was beating me, and I got divorced."

Economic violence

Economic violence uses financial obstacles and hardships as a means of control, most often by destroying the property of another person or jeopardizing their livelihood to intimidate them.

The following questions were asked of the women parliamentarians as part of the study to examine this form of violence:

In the course of your parliamentary term of office:

- Have you ever been refused any funds to which you were entitled (for example, parliamentary allowances)?
- Have you ever been refused any parliamentary resources (office, computers, staff, security) to which you were entitled?
- Has your property ever been damaged or destroyed?

A total of **29 per cent** of respondents reported experiencing economic violence during their mandate.

Nine per cent of respondents reported being refused funds to which they were entitled (allowances and expenses for parliamentary missions) and **11 per cent** reported being refused parliamentary resources to which they were entitled (for example, a car with a chauffeur). In their testimonies, these respondents explained the circumstances under which they are confronted with these economic obstacles: for instance, when they aspire towards parliamentary positions that are better paid or wish to participate in missions abroad. They associate these obstacles with subtle discrimination effected, in the majority of cases, at presidential level but also at the level of the parliamentary bureau.

"Not officially but when there is a mission, Parliament says there are no funds, but you can see that men are going."

"The reimbursement of mission expenses takes longer for women compared to male colleagues – a way of dissuading them from going on mission" or "They asked women to finance their own participation in missions without reimbursement."

"Women face discrimination with regard to service vehicles. The best vehicles are reserved for men. I didn't fight back; you have to pick your battles."

"As Vice-President, I should have the right to a vehicle, a chauffeur and a bodyguard. At the moment, I don't have anything."

In addition, **15 per cent** of respondents said that their personal property had been vandalized or destroyed, mostly by unknown people, but also by political opponents. These incidents took place in the private sphere, during political meetings or during election campaigns.

"My house was completely damaged by my opponent and his supporters."

"The wheels of my car were unscrewed by an unknown person."

"My car was burned during the campaign."

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is any act of violence of a sexual nature perpetrated on another person without their consent, including sexual harassment and other unwanted sexual acts, such as physical contact, advances, sexual remarks or requests for sex. This type of violence also encompasses requests for sexual favours, sexual assault and rape.

Sexual violence has affected **39 per cent** of women parliamentarians who participated in the study.

Three questions were asked to identify acts of sexual violence.

In the course of your parliamentary term of office:

Have you ever been the target of sexual harassment?

Have you ever been in a situation where a person in a position of authority abused his/her power to obtain sexual favours from you in exchange for a benefit that that person was empowered to withhold or confer?

Have you ever been the victim of an attempted sexual assault or rape?

Sexual harassment

Most respondents consider sexual harassment to be widespread in political life, particularly advances, comments and jokes of a sexual nature. **Forty per cent** of respondents have been sexually harassed over the course of their mandate, by male colleagues from opposing political parties in **49 per cent of cases**, or from the same party in **41 per cent of cases**. Harassment takes place mostly in parliament (in **83 per cent of cases**) and less frequently during political meetings (**19%**) and on social media (**17%**). Some report that these frequently occurring sexual remarks and advances are not usually considered as sexual harassment and that the concept itself does not exist or is not well understood in the political world.

"Sexual harassment against women is a very common thing. Male MPs are always joking and making advances. They keep coming back."

"A colleague touched my breast. It was filmed and published numerous times on social media."

"Because I refused the advances of the chair of a parliamentary group, he no longer lets me speak in meetings and has not included me in the small groups working during the COVID-19 pandemic."

"Sextortion" or requests for sexual favours

The term "sextortion", coined by merging the words "sex" and "extortion", is used to illustrate situations in which a person abuses his or her power to obtain sexual favours in exchange for a benefit that that person is empowered to withhold or confer. **Nine per cent** of participants reported receiving requests for sexual favours, sometimes in exchange for a post within a party, parliament or parliamentary assembly, and sometimes in exchange for equipment, financial support or participation in a mission abroad, etc. Interestingly, it appears that, in **55 per cent of cases**, these actions are committed by male colleagues from the same party, in **18 per cent of cases** by colleagues from opposing parties, and in **18 per cent of cases** by parliamentary staff.

"During a campaign, the Secretary-General of my party at the time came to my constituency with campaign packages and t-shirts that he said he would give me in exchange for sexual relations. I refused and no longer received support from my party to pay my campaign expenses."

"The men of the party tried for a long time to make it a requirement for women to sleep with them to be a candidate."

"Male colleagues told me: 'if you behave well, you may be able to chair a committee.'"

"The Secretary-General of my parliament harassed me and refused to send me on mission because I didn't give in to his advances! I avoid him; this has traumatized me, and I'm being penalized."

"At the time, I was attacked at home. I needed security. I went to this police officer. He promised to help me in exchange for sexual favours and refused me any help because I did not accept."

This type of blackmail and extortion, which seems pervasive in certain political parties and elsewhere, is doubly destructive. It is also used against women who are accused of agreeing to sexual favours to make a place for themselves in politics or to climb the ladder. This type of accusation can be found at the heart of allegations and false information aiming to degrade women in politics, to tarnish their reputations and, once again, to call their abilities into question. Public opinion casts scorn on women accused of "agreeing to sexual favours" instead of denouncing the criminal system and abuses of power that lead them to give in to sexual coercion.

"Cases of abuse occur, above all, within political parties. That's why women are scared to enter politics. They know that they will be thought of as someone who everyone sleeps with."

"During the election campaign, there were a lot of sexual innuendoes about me and allegations that I had agreed to do sexual favours in exchange for a political position."

“As a young MP I was harassed, abused and accused of being the girlfriend of powerful politicians.”

Sexual assault

Six per cent of respondents reported experiencing sexual assault. Most often, these incidents took place in parliament and were committed by colleagues from the same party, or by strangers in public places.

“Very often, they push and shove you to touch your bum. Members of Parliament tell us: ‘we have to touch you women before your mandate ends.’ The management knows about this behaviour but doesn’t do anything.”

“A colleague was a victim of sexual abuse in her office. She didn’t report it because of the position of the perpetrator.”

The intersectional nature of gender-based violence against women parliamentarians

The study brings to light, in a very explicit manner, how multiple and cross-cutting forms of discrimination can lead to an exponential increase in gender-based violence against some women parliamentarians. The intersectional nature of the discrimination reveals that some women in particular are even more vulnerable to violence.

The first form of intersectionality³⁹ has to do with the identity of the women parliamentarians who participated in the survey.

The study examined the impact of the following factors of intersectional discrimination: age, disability, minority group status and marital status (particularly, the fact of not being married). Table VI shows the extent to which the scale of the violence is greater for women affected by several factors of discrimination.

Table VI – Extent and nature of violence

Prevalence of the different forms of violence experienced by the women parliamentarians interviewed

	Number of respondents	% psychological violence	% economic violence	% physical violence	% sexual violence
All respondents	137	80%	29%	23%	39%
Age < 40 years old	26	85%	35%	38%	58%
Living with a disability	10	100%	60%	40%	50%
Belonging to a minority group	36	89%	28%	22%	47%
Unmarried	50	80%	36%	38%	50%

The percentages suggest that women parliamentarians living with disabilities are most seriously affected: all the percentages

for the different forms of violence are considerably higher for women living with disabilities than for the respondents as a whole (psychological violence +19 percentage points, economic violence +30, physical violence +17, sexual violence +10). Data relating to women parliamentarians under 40 years old also show a rate of violence that is considerably higher than for participants as a whole, particularly in relation to sexual violence (+19 percentage points) and physical violence (+15). This is also the case for those who are not married: physical violence (+15) and sexual violence (+11). Equally, for respondents belonging to a minority group⁴⁰ in their country, the percentages for psychological violence and sexual violence are higher than the percentages for the group as a whole.

As noted by some respondents, the intersectional nature of violence does not take away from the fact that discrimination and stereotyping of women play a key role. For example, young, single women and unmarried older women are considered to be sexually available for all men. Widows and women who do not conform to the traditional standards of beauty, agreeableness or subjugation as is expected of them are sometimes deemed witches or monsters.

“I am attacked because of the fact that I am single; my opponent refers to me as a prostitute, that I sleep around with all the men.”

“Men from my party would say, ‘this is a woman who does not have a husband, a free woman who will not know how to represent you.’ They then sent me texts making advances at me.”

“I am under pressure in my community as I am a widow and people question my ability to contribute as an MP: ‘How can a widow lead us? You are a nobody. You killed your husband.’”

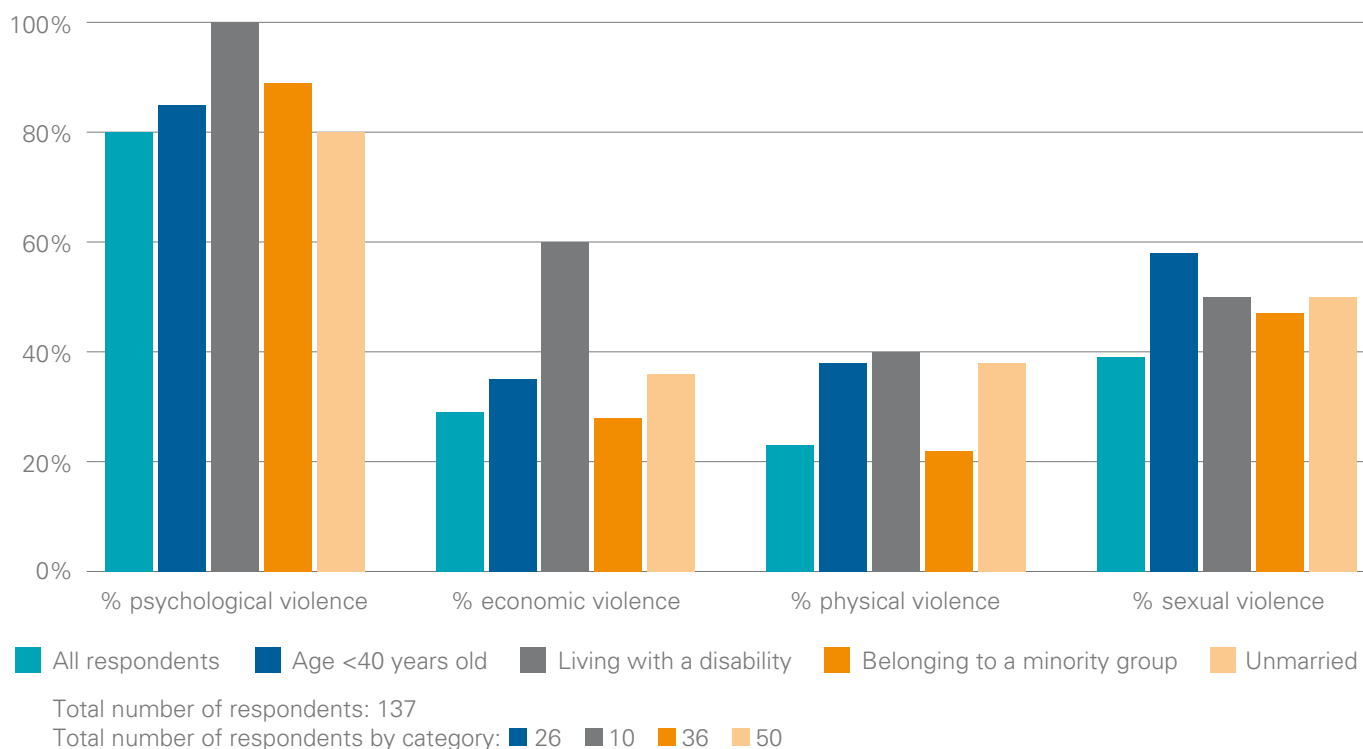
The second form of intersectionality has to do with the position and political activities of women parliamentarians.

For some, political violence and violence against women can, in fact, cross over and overlap (for more on this topic, see section on the normative framework, p. 5). The study confirms that this phenomenon particularly affects women who belong to the political opposition in their country. Table VII shows the extent of their exposure to all the different forms of gender-based violence examined here.

Table VII – Women parliamentarians belonging to the opposition

	% psychological violence	% economic violence	% physical violence	% sexual violence
All respondents	80%	29%	23%	39%
Respondents belonging to the opposition	90%	38%	31%	46%

The intersectional nature of violence against women parliamentarians



However, a woman does not have to belong to the opposition to be seen as a political rival. Regardless of the party, testimonies show that a woman parliamentarian who stands up in defence of women’s rights or gender equality is more vulnerable to attacks. This is often the case when a parliamentarian takes a feminist position in parliament or in the media or if she promotes a law on gender equality or sexual and reproductive health.

“Violence is a consequence of my work on women’s rights. They do not want a woman who takes a political position, especially if she is young.”

“A young female MP who presented the issue of free sanitary towels for young girls in parliament was seriously attacked on social media.”

“My party opposed a law addressing violence against women and girls, but I campaigned for it. This resulted in a smear campaign being waged against me where they sought to tarnish my reputation, demonize me, and accuse me of damaging society by spreading Western thinking.”

“I made statements with regard to teenage pregnancies and the fact that condoms should be given, and I was attacked for that on social media.”

“I am the president of the caucus for women parliamentarians. A budget is set aside for the activities of this caucus at parliamentary level, but the parliamentary authorities delay things because they don’t want me to do this or that activity. They sabotage what I want to do.”

Putting gender-based violence into context

The contexts in which women parliamentarians work can influence the forms, intensity and impact of the violence to which they are exposed. Some political, economic, social, cultural and religious contexts may pose greater risks for women: the general level of state and criminal violence, the weakness of the police and the justice system, the determination of parties to deny women access to political power, religious fundamentalism or jihadist violence. This can weaken state structures and capacities, leading to a degree of impunity for the perpetrators of violence, while victims are less likely to obtain redress. The level of acceptance of such violence may also vary across contexts.

Through their testimonies, the participants talked about social and cultural constraints (box 3), economic difficulties and the high level of violence in general within society, all of which have an impact on the extent of violence against women on the African continent, particularly in political life.

According to data published by the United Nations in 2015 on the prevalence of physical violence against women worldwide (regardless of the perpetrator), it was highest in Africa, with nearly half of African countries having a lifetime prevalence rate of more than 40 per cent (for comparison, half of European countries report a lifetime prevalence rate of about 30 per cent). According to the same report, acceptance of “wife-beating” was higher in Africa, Asia and Oceania than in other regions of the world.⁴¹ In 2020, regional differences in rates of physical

and sexual violence between intimate partners show that sub-Saharan Africa continues to be one of the regions where women are most vulnerable to such violence, after Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and South Asia.⁴²

These many contextual factors probably explain why the findings of the present study on Africa are closer to those of the 2016 IPU global study than to those of the 2018 study on Europe, particularly with regard to acts of physical and economic violence.

Similarly, according to the data cited above, women in Africa are reportedly more exposed to sexual violence than in other parts of the world.⁴³ Furthermore, according to ACLED data, since 2018, Africa has had the highest number of conflict-related sexual violence incidents.⁴⁴ These circumstances probably explain the high percentage of sexual violence recorded against women parliamentarians in Africa, which is significantly higher than in Europe (+14 percentage points) and globally (+17 percentage points).

Several respondents also mentioned particular contexts that are additional stressors that may exacerbate violence against women parliamentarians in Africa, such as the violence surrounding electoral processes. Others mentioned tensions during appointments to leadership and decision-making positions in parliament or political parties, especially when a woman openly aspires to obtaining one of these highly prized positions. These are two key moments when women may seek to gain a place in political life and access to decision-making.

Participants were asked about the impact of COVID-19, social distancing and lockdown on their working environment and the violence they may experience in the parliamentary world. While the majority of respondents did not see any immediate impact, some mentioned a few factors that may have had an aggravating impact on violence against women in parliament. It might be, for example, that the pandemic has increased violence in general against women and men parliamentarians, who have been targeted in demonstrations by citizens unhappy with lockdown measures. With the increase in the widespread use of the internet, some women parliamentarians have seen a spike in online attacks against them during the pandemic.⁴⁵ Others experienced an increase in domestic violence, exacerbated by lockdown measures, lack of privacy, economic pressures and fear of the virus. COVID-19 has also tended to hinder, or make invisible, the work of women parliamentarians committed to women's rights and gender equality, by relegating these issues to the bottom of the current political agenda.

"With COVID and the lockdown measures, many people have challenged and threatened parliamentarians on the street."

"It's affected us a lot: budgets are being cut, whole sections of the population have not received the allowances promised by the Government. There's a lot of discontent and some people are taking out their anger on their members of parliament."

"No way to defend women's interests because they say there are more important issues to deal with. COVID is used

as an excuse not to deal with women's issues. Yet women's issues and security should be national emergencies!"

Other participants reported some positive effects of distancing measures, working by videoconference or in small groups of parliamentarians:

"The pandemic has strengthened solidarity among women parliamentarians. We felt and were often seen as more concerned and competent to deal with the problem. We have done outreach."

"The impact was quite positive, as we had access to the plenary in smaller groups of parliamentarians, which gave more time to speak and made it easier for women to speak."

According to one parliamentary officer respondent, "COVID has helped raise awareness. With social distancing, certain familiarities have disappeared: we no longer kiss each other, so men are less tempted to abuse. These restrictions have been ratified and this has improved working conditions."

BOX 3: Understanding the causes and social and cultural constraints

"We want to free women from the feudal domination of men. This is not without great difficulty; it is a whole mentality to reconsider. I am questioning myself."
Thomas Sankara

The vast majority of participants identified social and cultural constraints as the main reason for the sexism and violence encountered by women in African parliaments. Each in their own way, they described a system of norms and values that posit as "natural," "legitimate" and "acceptable" the discrimination and domination of women by men, and in particular the male domination of the political space. According to several respondents, violations of women's political and human rights in politics are carried out in the name of culture and religion, as African societies have institutionalized patriarchy through tradition, custom or religious culture.

Male domination of the political space

The idea of male domination of the political arena is based on the cultural division of public and private spaces, which associates public and political spaces with men and private spaces and the home with women. This divide is culturally marked by a gender hierarchy that values men and male attributes in public and political leadership while delegitimizing women's rights and opportunities to move in public spaces. Thus, when women enter the political arena, which has long been a male preserve, they may be subjected to hostile behaviour and violence by some men who are unwilling to relinquish their position and seek to retain their gains.

"Men don't like to see women leaders; they are afraid of losing their place. They don't like to see a woman evolving in the same space as them."

A member of parliament

“Gender equality is a challenge for men. Politics is now open to women, but men have to make room for them. Men see women as threats. They say, ‘You are taking our place.’”
A member of parliament

“The men want to take all the places. Women have to stay in the backyard cleaning and cooking.”
A member of parliament

Machismo as a norm of masculinity?

According to one parliamentary respondent, “in the culture, women are considered to be born for the man, for the pleasure of the man, who can do anything with them. She is an object, not a partner. If a man treats his wife well and considers her a partner, he will be humiliated by other men.” By extension, culturally, socially and politically, men must therefore display and assert their physical and sexual superiority over women and other men.

“Sexism and sexual harassment are, for some men, a story of asserting their power and ego, and a game to be talked about among colleagues.”
A parliamentary officer

“These macho behaviours are part of our culture. It can start as a simple joke, but sometimes it becomes more serious and a woman may be afraid of losing her job or ashamed that it will become public.”
A parliamentary officer

“I asked several politicians, ‘Why do you want to sleep with your female colleagues at all costs?’ They replied, ‘A woman who sleeps with you can never betray you.’”
A member of parliament

“With men in power, women like their power and their money. Men are used to getting women to yield to their advances. There is a lot of flirtation and women don’t always realize that what we are sometimes doing is supporting an environment of harassment.”

The experience of female parliamentary staff

Participation in the survey

The **87** female parliamentary staff who participated in the survey come from **47** African countries.

They belong to the following age groups:

Table VIII – Age of female members of parliamentary staff interviewed

Age of respondents	Percentage
18–30 years old	9%
31–40 years old	33%
41–45 years old	15%
46–50 years old	18%
51–60 years old	22%
61–70 years old	2%

They are all parliamentary officers, except for two who are political party employees. They belong to three socio-professional groups represented in the following proportions:

Table IX – Occupational groups of women members of parliamentary staff interviewed

Groups	Percentage
Management/senior staff	49%
Middle managers (administrators, committee secretaries)	33%
Officers/employees (administrative assistants)	16%
Other	2%

Psychological violence

Of the female parliamentary staff who participated in the study, **67 per cent** reported having experienced psychological violence while working in parliament.

Sexist behaviour and remarks

Some **56 per cent** of respondents reported that they had been subjected to sexist behaviour and remarks in the course of their work, including jokes and derogatory remarks while pregnant, as well as remarks about their physical appearance or questioning their competence. These comments were most often made by male colleagues working in parliament (**67%**) and parliamentarians (**30%**). In **98 per cent of cases**, they took place on parliamentary premises, as well as in electronic communications (**13%**) and during business trips within the country or abroad (**19%**).

“There is this condescending way of talking to you. A lot of men see it not as a right you have to work in parliament, but as a gift you are given.”

“During an interview I had with a committee chairman for a position, he asked me if I was capable of supervising the work of a male colleague!”

“My appearance has been the subject of criticism. I entered parliament at a very young age. I was called a little girl: ‘It is not normal for a director to plait her hair like that’. A woman, and a young woman at that, cannot be a leader. When I became the director nobody wanted to work with me; I did all the work myself. It took a long time for people around me to believe in my abilities. Women are relegated to the role of secretaries or hostesses.”

“My direct supervisor told me that I always looked grumpy when I was supposed to be smiling. It’s very hard to know how to react when you’re being talked down to. They say we are ‘grumpy’ to silence us.”

“It’s mostly derogatory remarks – when I was pregnant I heard someone say I had a child every year!”

“Pregnant jokes: ‘In this state, it’s best to avoid showing yourself and going into the plenary room!’”

“During an official event, male colleagues said I was emotional, that I wasn’t thinking rationally, referring to the menopause I was supposedly going through.”

Psychological harassment/bullying

In the course of their work in parliament, **38 per cent** of the respondents indicated that they had been subjected to psychological harassment, in **72 per cent of cases** by fellow parliamentary staff (the vast majority of whom were men, but some were women) and in **22 per cent of cases** by male parliamentarians.

As in the case of sexist remarks, **96 per cent** of these incidents of harassment took place on parliamentary premises, as well as during electronic communications (**7%**) and during business trips within the country or abroad (**7%**).

“When I was a newcomer to an all-male office, my colleagues did a lot of withholding of information from me; they tested me.”

“I was bullied at the beginning of my career. One of my colleagues was also bullied because she was disabled.”

“I was the victim of threats and psychological harassment from a parliamentarian after refusing his sexual advances.”

“There is a total disregard for the executive secretaries, who are not given work and are subjected to psychological harassment.”

Online and offline sexist threats and attacks

Some **22 per cent** of the participants also reported sexist attacks online and **7 per cent** said they had received threats to their physical integrity, more than a third of them from male parliamentary staff.

“There is a targeted online campaign against me. I am called a ‘witch’ or ‘the devil’ because I stand up for women. A woman is not supposed to speak her mind.”

“There is a platform for parliamentary staff where inappropriate things are posted.”

“A soldier threatened to slap me. He refused to allow me to drive my car to the courtyard of parliament, claiming I was an intern when I showed him my director’s badge. A Member of Parliament intervened to make him let me pass.”

Economic violence

The study also shows that economic violence is frequently used to increase psychological violence against female parliamentary staff. For example, **18 per cent** of participants reported having been threatened – usually by a supervisor – with losing their job or having their career advancement blocked. Some **24 per cent** of the women reported that they had been denied funds to which they were entitled, such as salary or bonuses, by a supervisor (**59 per cent of cases**) or by a parliamentarian (**32 per cent of cases**).

“For a long time, my supervisor refused to validate my tenure and threatened me.”

“I was denied overtime allowance. I was told that I was there to do the work: ‘you do the work or you leave.’”

“I worked as a secretary and was paid the salary of a hostess for three years. I fought to have my rights recognized. I was finally reclassified, but I was never paid the difference in salary for those three years.”

Physical violence

Three per cent of the respondents reported being hit or pushed in parliament. In two of the three cases reported, the act was committed by a female parliamentary staff member. One participant was slapped and threatened with a weapon by a security guard in parliament.

Several respondents said that they had witnessed physical violence between colleagues and had also been informed of domestic violence against women colleagues who confided in them.

Sexual violence

Sexual harassment

Some **45 per cent** of female parliamentary staff respondents reported having been sexually harassed in the course of their work in parliament. They mentioned unwelcome sexual advances, sexual remarks and requests for sexual acts from male parliamentarians (in **53 per cent of cases**) and from male colleagues on the parliamentary staff (in **48 per cent of cases**). Several respondents mentioned acts that were more akin to sexual assault, such as forced kissing, slapping the buttocks or other non-consensual touching of the breasts or thighs. These acts of sexual harassment were committed in **85 per cent of cases** on parliamentary premises, but also during business trips at home or abroad (in **42 per cent of cases**), by telephone or on social media (in **18 per cent of cases**).

"There is always the same pattern on mission: sexual comments such as 'we should keep each other company.'"

"I found myself pinned against the wall and chased into a room."

"A colleague shouted at me 'you suck', physically leaning forward. I was shocked and terrified. I complained to my manager and my colleague apologized, but that was it."

"I was sexually harassed by my superior. He was obsessed with me: he made advances to me when I lost my husband, sent me naked pictures of himself, and asked me to come to his hotel room."

"My supervisor is increasing his advances towards me to the point where I can't be alone with him, I can't talk to him."

Sextortion

When asked about sextortion in the course of their work, **18 per cent** of participants said that they had been confronted with requests for sexual favours from a fellow parliamentary staff member (**56 per cent of cases**) or a parliamentarian (**44 per cent of cases**) in exchange for a benefit that the colleague or parliamentarian was empowered to withhold or confer. All these acts of sextortion were committed in parliament.

These respondents spoke of a widespread practice used by administrative staff or parliamentarians when recruiting, deciding on grade advances or promoting. Some explained that it is poverty and precariousness that lead to these situations, commonly referred to as the "casting couch", stressing that "salaries are not sufficient to meet family needs at home and in the village". They point out that interns and parliamentary assistants are even more vulnerable to this type of abuse because of their precarious employment status.

Sexual assault

Among female parliamentary staff, **5 per cent** reported having been sexually assaulted or raped, half of which were perpetrated by a parliamentarian and half by a parliamentary staff member.

Reporting violence

The study shows that the reporting of violence remains very low for both parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

With regard to women parliamentarians

- Among the respondents who experienced one or more acts of gender-based violence during their mandate, **22 per cent** indicated that they had never told anyone about it before this study. The remainder said they had told a family member, friend or colleague.
- Only **13 per cent** of respondents who had been subjected to sexist remarks reported it to their parliamentary authorities or

political party; **32 per cent** of those who had been the target of intimidation reported it to their parliamentary authorities; **48 per cent** of parliamentarians who had been threatened reported it to the police; **24 per cent** of those who had been subjected to sexist attacks online reported it to the police, to those in charge of an online platform or to a court.

- Some **27 per cent** of respondents who had been slapped, pushed or hit reported it to the police or to their political party authorities; **57 per cent** of those who had been physically abused with a weapon reported it to the police.
- Only **7 per cent** of respondents who had been sexually harassed had told their parliamentary authorities; **38 per cent** of those who had been sexually assaulted had reported it to their parliamentary authorities or sought support from a women's organization.

Women parliamentarians who have survived an act of physical violence are more likely to report it (especially when a weapon was used). Similarly, threats to physical integrity are more often reported. This is probably due to the fact that these acts are better recognized in national criminal legislation and that physical violence is generally considered to cause more suffering to victims.

In Africa, sexist online attacks, sexist remarks and especially sexual harassment tend to be reported less by women parliamentarians.

With regard to female parliamentary staff

- Among those who had experienced one or more acts of gender-based violence in the course of their parliamentary work, **21 per cent** indicated that they were talking about it for the first time in the context of this study.
- Only **14 per cent** of respondents who had been subjected to sexist remarks and **12 per cent** of those who had been subjected to psychological harassment/bullying had reported it to their parliamentary authorities.
- Some **33 per cent** of respondents who had been slapped, pushed or hit reported it to their parliamentary authorities.
- Only **13 per cent** of female parliamentary staff who had been sexually harassed had reported it to their parliamentary authorities; **25 per cent** of those who had been sexually assaulted had reported it.

Female civil servants are also more likely to report violence to their physical integrity (beatings, slaps, sexual assaults) than acts of psychological harassment and sexual harassment and sexist comments and behaviour.

It is important to understand why the respondents most often did not report these acts of violence. The following reasons were given for not reporting the violence.

- The institutional environment tolerates such behaviour or views sexism and gender-based violence as unimportant issues that do not merit attention. In addition, some respondents spoke of a lack of awareness, believing that sometimes victims are unaware that they are victims or downplay the situation for fear of punishment.

"It was not considered as a major issue, so nothing has been done."

A parliamentary officer

"I was told that it is part of my job and that we were both adults. As staff, we are in a powerless situation."

A parliamentary officer

"The parliamentary authorities replied to me: 'in politics you have to expect everything. Don't respond and after a few days it will pass!'"

A member of parliament

"We have discussed the problem among women members of parliament and with male colleagues, but men are saying to us, 'you are making a fuss over nothing!'"

A member of parliament

- There is currently no reliable reporting mechanism in their parliaments. Reporting harassment or violence is discouraged by the absence, weakness or non-implementation of mechanisms in parliaments to report such acts of violence in confidence and to lodge a complaint so that the perpetrators can be investigated and punished.

"In parliament, there is no place to lodge a report. There should be an office for that purpose."

A parliamentary officer

"There are no guidelines for members of parliament and staff, no clear policy against sexual harassment, no code of conduct. Male peers are empowered to sexually harass colleagues. They see it as a way of teasing you and even flattering you."

A parliamentary officer

"My boss told me to keep praying, not to be mean, but to be firm with the parliamentarians who come and harass me in my office."

A parliamentary officer

"There is no internal mechanism for dealing with sexual harassment of parliamentarians. I am trying to develop a personal defence strategy on the advice of my department head."

A parliamentary officer

"There is no specific procedure that I can follow. I don't know what the consequences will be for the person I'm going to report. This situation gives men encouragement and discourages women from reporting. Women fear that it will go public. They're frightened that they would lose their reputation and they don't know about their rights."

A parliamentary officer

"Managers protect staff informally, but there is no formal way to deal with these kinds of issues."

A parliamentary officer

- For women parliamentarians, reporting an incident would be tantamount to exposing themselves further, risking too

much politically, being disloyal to or damaging their political party, or being subjected to indifference or inaction by the parliamentary authorities.

"If you criticize openly, you die politically."

A member of parliament

"Women are very partisan and don't dare to report violence out of fear of harming their party. As the principles are not really enforced, impunity is high. Women think that violence against women in politics is part of life."

A member of parliament

"By reporting it, we would be exposing ourselves to even more problems. There's no point; there's not going to be any punishment anyway."

A member of parliament

- For staff members, reporting an incident is complicated because of their subordinate position (fear of losing their job, fear that their voice will not be heard in comparison to that of a parliamentarian or a superior).

"There is a need to talk, but there is little discretion and confidentiality and everything comes out. Victims are afraid of being mocked, of not being taken seriously. They do not dare to speak out, especially if it is a member of parliament who is harassing them. They try to cover up the problem and it is the victim who feels ashamed. Deviant behaviour, which is very present in the political world, is ignored in silence."

A parliamentary officer

"Women are afraid of being abandoned, afraid of being fired, afraid of how others will react."

A parliamentary officer

"Sexual harassment is rampant, but nobody talks about it. They fear that the working environment will become unfriendly and that they will lose their job."

A parliamentary officer

- Reporting it would create other problems for them, for example their colleagues might consider them to be at fault, question the veracity of their allegations, or imply that they caused the harassment or violence.

"Women are seen as foolish. Women who report sexual harassment or abuse are humiliated. The veracity of their word is questioned. The victims' experiences are belittled. There are no senior female members in HR in whom to confide. All positions are held by men – there is no confidentiality."

A parliamentary officer

"It only got me into trouble. Privileges were withheld from me – I was seen as a trouble-maker."

A parliamentary officer

All of these factors contribute to a culture of silence and impunity, which perpetuates abuse, psychological and sexual harassment and sextortion and gives the perpetrators a kind of power.

Effects and consequences

Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff undermine their dignity and human rights. These acts can also cause them psychological and physical harm, and affect their health and sometimes their ability to carry out their work. They also create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment and perpetuate gender inequality. They can also have some financial costs to the institution (in the form of absenteeism or reduced productivity) and affect the quality of services and the proper functioning of parliament.

The study reveals that **72 per cent** of women parliamentarians who had experienced psychological, economic, physical or sexual violence were upset by what had happened to them. Others said they were shocked, angry and discouraged at the time and **53 per cent** felt isolated and abandoned.

“This experience undermined my confidence, my self-worth and my own appreciation of my skills.”

“It lowers morale; it makes you take a backwards step.”

Among these women, **65 per cent** feared for their safety and the safety of their loved ones, and **37 per cent** took steps to increase their safety at work or at home, such as coming home early, leaving with a security guard, or recording their telephone conversations.

Nevertheless, **94 per cent** of them stated their determination to continue their parliamentary mission and to run for another term.

Many find the strength to continue their parliamentary work within their support networks of family, friends and activists who are close to them and encourage them. Forums for women parliamentarians also play a supportive role, providing mutual aid and promoting solidarity among women parliamentarians, especially when one of them is confronted with gender-based violence. In the Kenyan Parliament, for example, following the physical assault of a female Member of Parliament by a male colleague, women members of parliament walked out en masse during the reading of the national budget to demand an end to the misogynistic behaviour of their male colleagues.⁴⁶

Some **77 per cent** of the female parliamentary staff who had experienced harassment and violence said they were upset by the experience and **30 per cent** feared losing their jobs. Some **68 per cent** felt isolated and abandoned, and **46 per cent** said that the experience had affected their ability to do their jobs normally. In general, many respondents expressed feelings of powerlessness, frustration and injustice.

All of these effects and their consequences are incompatible with the expectations of parliaments to be inclusive, representative and effective institutions and workplaces that practise gender equality in their functioning and work.⁴⁷

Sexism and violence against women in parliaments also undermine women's willingness to enter and pursue a career

in politics. They can also affect their visibility and influence during their term of office, which in turn affects the quality and effectiveness of parliamentary work.

Solutions and best practices

The study reveals several factors that contribute to the culture of silence that allows sexism and violence against women to flourish in parliaments and political life. There is an urgent need for parliaments and other political actors to take the problem seriously and to take action, given the endemic nature of such violence and the low reporting rates – both to internal parliamentary bodies and to external bodies such as the police, the courts, political parties and social networking platforms. It is incumbent on parliaments to assess the measures taken to combat sexism and violence against women on their premises and to provide solutions that meet women's needs and protect their rights.

This final section proposes responses and possible solutions for parliaments, their members and staff. These proposals are based on examples of practices in African countries and parliaments, work carried out by the IPU and other organizations and, above all, the views expressed by the women who participated in the survey.

Legislative reform

First and foremost, to eliminate violence against women in politics and in parliaments, is the need to have strong and properly enforced laws to address all forms of violence against women, including violence in politics and gender-based harassment and violence in the workplace. Laws are needed to provide protection and support to victims, create the right conditions for reporting such violence and hold perpetrators accountable. In this area, although some laws are still weak or their implementation remains uneven, progress is being made across Africa. According to World Bank data, 33 African countries have a law on violence against women, gender-based violence or domestic violence and 30 countries have laws governing sexual harassment in the workplace.⁴⁸

Parliaments, as the primary legislative institutions of States, are well placed to strengthen existing laws or enact new ones to end violence against women in politics. According to international and regional human rights standards, legislative reform in this area can be achieved through one of the following channels:

- 1) Incorporating provisions on violence against women in politics into existing laws on the elimination of violence against women
- 2) Passing new stand-alone laws to prohibit and criminalize violence against women in politics
- 3) Adopting or improving domestic laws and policies against harassment and violence at work, including sexual harassment and gender-based violence
- 4) Legislating on violence against women in politics through legislative changes to electoral or criminal codes

For now, Tunisia is the only country in Africa whose domestic law on combating violence against women, adopted in 2017, recognizes and defines political violence and provides specific sanctions for this form of violence (box 4).

In addition, to counter the spread of sexist attacks, online threats and other forms of cyber-violence against women, including in politics, parliaments can pass strong laws on online violence that cover the most harmful and widespread forms of violence against women in politics. They can also improve the regulatory frameworks of companies that own online platforms, so that such companies ensure online accountability, fulfil duty-of-care and transparency requirements, and set up safeguards to protect women from cyber-violence. Parliaments can also ensure that these platforms provide mechanisms for reporting and punishing abuse.⁴⁹ They can also promote capacity-building for the police to prevent and respond to online abuse.

Legislation on violence against women, including in politics, must clearly apply to parliament and parliamentarians as it does to society as a whole. Any parliamentarian who is implicated in an act of gender-based violence should therefore not enjoy any special status or protection because of his or her mandate.⁵⁰ Parliamentary immunity, which in some countries requires the prior consent of parliament before a parliamentarian can be prosecuted or subjected to binding legal proceedings, should never grant any form of impunity in this respect. It is the responsibility of parliament to ascertain whether the charges are just and well founded, and if they are, it must acknowledge this and allow justice to take its course.⁵¹

BOX 4: Tunisia's law on violence against women includes political violence

This law, passed in 2017, includes a broad definition of violence against women. In addition to physical violence, it recognizes forms of economic, sexual, political and psychological violence. Article 3 defines political violence as: "any act or practice based on gender discrimination the perpetrator of which aims to deprive or prevent women from exercising any political, partisan or associative activity or any fundamental right or freedom." Article 18 provides for a fine of 1,000 dinars for anyone who commits political violence. The penalty is increased to six (6) months' imprisonment in the event of a repeat offence.⁵²

Institutional reform in parliaments

Parliaments are also places of work. As such, they are called on to recognize sexism and gender-based violence within their institutions for what they are: violations of human rights that cannot be tolerated in politics. To help them achieve zero tolerance, the IPU has published guidelines that provide practical advice and information on how to design and implement policies to prevent and eliminate sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments.⁵³

With this tool, parliaments are called on to:

- assess the situation in their institutions
- adopt specific policies or revise existing rules to end sexism and gender-based violence, with regard to parliamentarians and all those who work in parliament

- provide confidential access to victim support services
- provide remedies, including complaint and investigation mechanisms, and disciplinary sanctions for perpetrators
- raise awareness and provide training to all those working in parliament

Internal policies

Calling for the implementation of such measures in their parliaments, several participants in the study stressed that an effective internal policy against violence should clearly describe acts of sexism, sexual harassment and psychological harassment, with examples of prohibited behaviour. The policy should also clearly outline the remedies available to report and stop harassment, and include specific sanctions for perpetrators. It can be implemented by amending internal regulations or a code of conduct already in force, or by drafting a new policy or code of conduct. This may also be an opportunity to review the rules of immunity from the point of view of gender-based violence.⁵⁴

"If there was an internal mechanism against sexual harassment in parliament, I would use it and report it. The training sessions would help women to be better prepared in the event of harassment and the anonymous helplines would help us to see more clearly and find solutions."
A parliamentary officer

The same type of policy could also be developed within political parties.

The examples of policies from African parliaments are still in their infancy, but they are evidence of efforts to prevent and respond to such acts. For the time being, they relate mainly to sexual harassment among parliamentary staff. Policies covering psychological harassment/bullying are still rare, as are policies covering harassment and violence among parliamentarians.

The Parliament of Uganda has had a Human Resource Policy Manual since 2019, drafted by its Parliamentary Commission, which details what may constitute sexual harassment, giving several specific examples of incidents from the physical (unwelcome physical contact to sexual assault), to the verbal (sexual advances, sexual jokes) or non-verbal (sexually suggestive gestures). The manual provides for the punishment of any person, including duty officers, parliamentary clients, casual workers, contractors or visitors who are guilty of sexual harassment. It specifies that sexual harassment is prohibited both inside and outside parliament, including at social events, on business trips, during training sessions or at conferences.⁵⁵

The Parliament of Sierra Leone's gender policy for public servants (2019) contains a broad definition of sexual harassment in the workplace that encompasses inappropriate behaviour with sexual connotations, whether direct or implied, and behaviour that may create an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment. Specific examples are also given: indecent or inappropriate gestures or language; sexual innuendo, jokes or remarks; posting of offensive or derogatory pornographic images; sexual assault. These reprehensible acts may be committed individually or in groups, be directed against women or men,

and occur between peers or within a hierarchical relationship (the latter being considered an aggravating circumstance).⁵⁶

In South Africa, parliament put in place a sexual harassment policy in 2006 that applies to all parliamentary employees and assistants, but the procedure is different depending on who is the subject of the complaint (a parliamentarian, another employee or a parliamentary assistant):

- if the complaint is against a member of parliament, it may be filed with the Joint Ethics Committee, which is responsible for enforcing the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament and Constituencies
- if the complaint is against another employee or a parliamentary assistant, a formal or informal complaint of sexual harassment can be made at line manager level and up to the Secretary General of Parliament and investigated⁵⁷

Training

The majority of respondents considered that training was a first step in bringing the issue to the table and talking about it in parliament. Training, based on information and exchange, was also seen as a prerequisite for providing all those in parliament with the same level of information and understanding of the issues of sexism, sexual harassment and psychological harassment. Such training should be organized at the beginning of the parliamentary term and then on an annual basis. As these are often taboo and sensitive issues, it is difficult to combat such violence when we are not able to identify it. It is therefore essential for the training to generate discussion and for men to participate. As several participants explained, most people working in parliament, including women, are not fully aware of their rights and duties, do not know exactly what psychological harassment and sexual harassment are, and do not appreciate the negative impact of such acts on the individuals concerned and on the parliamentary institution. Some participants recommended that the training follow a human rights-based approach, adopting a broad perspective that would also be of interest to men. They would like men to become partners and active participants in the elimination of violence against women in parliaments.

“Training is needed, including for those who commit acts without knowing it is harassment.”

A member of parliament

Counselling and support units

Several respondents stressed the need to set up listening, counselling and support services where victims can express themselves in complete confidentiality and receive information on psychological and legal issues. They recommended that these units be set up outside parliament for reasons of discretion and that they be run by specialists.

“Providing confidential support is needed because when it happens you feel scared of losing your job and would rather not talk about it.”

A parliamentary officer

“Counselling units, run by professional lawyers and psychologists, bound by professional secrecy, would be useful because women are afraid to talk.”

A member of parliament

“There should be many options for where to report harassment inside and outside parliament. The counselling or support unit should be staffed by legally trained counsellors. They should be sound and balanced, professional, empathetic and compassionate, and have integrity.”

A parliamentary officer

In Uganda, as parliament has taken a very clear stand against sexual harassment in the workplace, an external adviser was hired in 2021 to help open discussions on the issue.

In Sierra Leone, although the parliamentary policy on gender equality does not provide for counselling units as such, the document calls on department heads to take steps to create a working environment based on openness and trust. They are advised to be good listeners, to inform staff who are victims of harassment about the complaints procedure, not to judge or doubt the authenticity of a testimony, to reassure them about the confidentiality of the process and, above all, to be aware of their share of responsibility for the well-being of their subordinates.

Independent complaints mechanism

In the absence of regulatory remedies and complaints procedures, some respondents indicated that they had chosen to defend themselves or had opted for ad hoc and informal reporting strategies, which in some cases enabled them to improve their situation “out of court.” However, other participants felt that out-of-court settlements, which are most often to the detriment of the victims, are not a good solution.

“I defended myself and reported the sexist remarks to the political authorities. The colleague was summoned by these authorities and apologized.”

A member of parliament

“The leader of his party asked him to stop and indicated that he would never get another post if he continued.”

A member of parliament

“We were a group of female staff harassed sexually by some parliamentarians. We reported it to the Clerk, who informed the legal officer of the Parliamentary Council, who went directly to the Speaker. The Speaker raised the matter with the parliamentarians concerned and the member who was harassing me came to my office and apologized. It never happened again because men pass the word around: ‘don’t mess with her because she’ll report it.’”

A parliamentary officer

The IPU guidelines stress the need for independent complaints mechanisms with the capacity to receive and investigate complaints from all categories of persons working in parliament. These mechanisms must be secure and confidential, responsive to the rights and needs of

complainants, fair to all parties, and based on a thorough, impartial and reasoned investigation.

The complaints procedure must be completed within a reasonable time and, in cases of proven harassment and violence, must be followed by the rigorous implementation of disciplinary sanctions.

According to the Human Resource Policy Manual of the Parliament of Uganda, the sexual harassment complaints mechanism operates as follows:

- When an employee is a victim of harassment, he or she may inform his or her supervisor, or another manager if the supervisor is the harasser.
- The situation may be resolved informally, if the victim so chooses, within five days, under the auspices of the human resources manager, in a discussion between the two parties, ensuring that the situation ends.
- The situation may also be dealt with through the official channel: when the informal complaints mechanism has not led to a satisfactory solution for the victim, the head of the human resources department refers the case to the Clerk or to the Speaker of Parliament when the complaint concerns a member of parliament. An investigation will be initiated and carried out by a specific committee set up by the Clerk.⁵⁸

Upon receipt of the committee's report, the Commission⁵⁹ will examine the facts within one month and decide on the penalty. A staff member found guilty of sexual harassment is liable to disciplinary action for gross misconduct, up to and including dismissal (possible sanctions are: dismissal, demotion, termination of contract). The procedure is confidential and the victim has the right to be assisted by a counsellor under the Employee Assistance Programme.

In Sierra Leone, the parliamentary policy on gender equality provides for the establishment of a Complaints Committee to review cases of sexual harassment or gender discrimination. The committee is composed of the Clerk to Parliament or, in his/her absence, his/her deputy, the leader of the majority parliamentarians, the leader of the opposition, the leaders of the various parties, the chair of the women's parliamentary caucus, three administrators, a representative of the Paramount Chiefs, a representative of the senior staff and a representative of the junior staff. According to the procedure, the victim or any person who feels offended must submit a written complaint to the committee within 15 days of the incident, indicating the name of the alleged harasser. The committee may initiate an internal investigation and must decide within 30 days of the complaint being filed. Confidentiality is ensured during the procedure. If the offender is found guilty, the committee, in consultation with the whips or human resources, will decide on the appropriate sanction: verbal warning, suspension or dismissal, if applicable.

Zambia has a complaints procedure to prevent sexism and sexual harassment against parliamentarians and staff. For

parliamentarians: In cases of sexual harassment, the Speaker refers the case to the Committee on Privileges, Absences and Support Services. The case is examined by the Complaints Committee, which submits its findings and recommendations to the Speaker. For staff members: Cases of sexual harassment are dealt with by the Disciplinary Committee after a victim has reported the incident, in accordance with the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures for Parliamentary Staff. If a staff member is found guilty of such an offence, he or she will be dismissed immediately.⁶⁰

The IPU also has a unique mechanism to protect the human rights of parliamentarians: the Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians. The Committee is composed of 10 parliamentarians representing the different regions of the world, with a view to ensuring parity between men and women. Cases can be referred by parliamentarians faced with harassment and violence, including against women parliamentarians. The Committee works to establish the truth of the facts through hearings with the parties concerned, field missions and trial observations, with a view to reaching a satisfactory settlement in conformity with relevant international law, existing domestic legislation and international human rights recommendations. It exerts pressure on the authorities of the country concerned by mobilizing the parliamentary community in support of parliamentarians who are threatened or whose rights are violated.

To protect the rights of women parliamentarians against harassment and violence they suffer because they are women, the Committee has developed a complaint form, available online,⁶¹ which includes an explicit reference to acts of gender-based violence. This new category of violation is intended to clearly identify the violence suffered by women parliamentarians in order to find appropriate solutions, which sometimes require a rethink of the functioning of the parliamentary institution as a whole. Women parliamentarians who are victims of this type of violation may refer the matter to the Committee in complete confidentiality, as the Committee's procedure allows them to keep their identity confidential for as long as they wish. Similarly, the Committee may, at the request of the victims, keep confidential any decision taken on their case.

Role of the security services

Parliaments have a responsibility to create a safe and protective environment for all their members and staff, and they are not exempt from this responsibility when the attackers are third parties. The role of parliamentary security services is crucial, as is the possibility for them to collaborate with the police, especially when a member or other person working in parliament is threatened or attacked because of his or her activities in parliament.

This study has revealed that security service personnel can sometimes be the perpetrators of violence against the women they are supposed to be protecting. It is therefore essential that security services be made aware of gender-based violence and trained to respond appropriately to such acts with the same seriousness as any other act of violence.

Nowadays, security services need to be well versed in the digital environment to advise and assist parliamentarians who are subject to intimidation, threats (including death threats and threats of sexual violence) and insults, including those of a gender-based and sexual nature, via mobile messaging and social media.

Among the suggestions made by the respondents in the area of prevention and security was the idea of having a vehicle available at parliamentary premises for female parliamentary staff to ensure their safety when they work late at night.

Complementary mechanisms

Forums for women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff

The forums or caucuses allow women parliamentarians to come together, to create a space that is adapted to their needs and to establish multi-party collaboration among themselves. This study clearly showed that forums for women parliamentarians are places that are conducive to the sharing of experiences, mutual support and solidarity among women parliamentarians.

Forums can also be places for finding solutions, drawing attention to gender-based violence, providing support to victims, and encouraging the parliamentary institution to stop tolerating such abuses and to take action to eliminate them. Some forums open their activities to female parliamentary staff and promote awareness and solidarity among women on issues of discrimination and gender-based violence. Separate forums are also being developed for female parliamentary staff.

"We need to build a strong women's network to support women who experience harassment and violence in parliament and political life, and make parliament a safe place."
A member of parliament

"The women's parliamentary caucus also includes female parliamentary staff. It provides some legal assistance that can help initiate proceedings against a perpetrator of violence. It also organizes awareness-raising workshops on the issue of sexual harassment and other gender-based violence."
A member of parliament

"You can share experiences there, which gives you strength and allows you to learn about the difficulties in advance and be better able to face them."
A member of parliament

"It would be important to organize round tables between caucuses of women parliamentarians in Africa and to have exchanges on these issues. Sharing experiences is very useful and helps us to better understand what is unacceptable and to propose ways to prevent violence against women in politics. Women in politics must be prepared to deal with these situations."
A member of parliament

The Parliamentary Women and Gender Rights Forum of the Parliament of South Africa provides a platform for female parliamentary employees to share their experiences and implement strategies to address systemic barriers such as economic exclusion, gender-based violence, or difficulty in accessing career advancement. The forum serves as a first point of contact for women employees facing gender-based harassment, violence, discrimination and other structural barriers in their work environment.

Verbal self-defence and counter-speech

Survey participants stressed the importance of responding to sexist remarks and sexual harassment by turning the tables on the perpetrators and highlighting their inappropriate behaviour. Some felt, for example, that it is important to respond by demanding respect. Others said that they did not dare to respond because they felt powerless in the face of sexist attacks. It was suggested that verbal self-defence training be organized to provide women with the arguments and language to deal with such situations. The training would be particularly useful at the beginning of their mandate, when women enter the political arena without knowing parliamentary etiquette, to help them react to verbal sexist attacks and threats or attacks on social media.

Partnership with associations

Developing partnerships with civil society organizations, particularly women's rights associations, is another possible avenue for reporting gender-based violence against women to parliament. As seen in this study, some of the women who participated in the survey turned to associations following an assault and found support, care and counselling there. These organizations can also raise awareness of the value of women's full participation in politics and generate public debate on how to change politics to make it more inclusive.

One Member of Parliament who was a victim of gender-based violence explained: *"Judicial proceedings are under way. I have received the support of a number of feminist associations which have filed a complaint with me. Parliament has done nothing."*

Role of men

Several respondents expressed the wish that their colleagues, male parliamentarians and civil servants would show solidarity with women and defend the cause of equality between women and men by promoting zero tolerance of sexism and violence against women in parliament. As can be seen from the testimonies cited above, some participants are convinced that the solution lies in raising men's awareness of the problem. If they are trained to understand and recognize these inappropriate acts, men will become more aware of abusive behaviour. They will be able to react immediately, support the victims, talk to their male colleagues who are perpetrators of violence and report them if necessary, break the silence, take a stand against such behaviour in parliament and in the media, and thus set an example of good behaviour.

Conclusion

“This study should be a guide, a support that women in parliaments can use to defend themselves and ask the various parliaments to take internal action.”

A member of parliament

This study owes much to the valuable contribution of the women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 50 African countries who participated in the survey. They gave of their time to share their personal experiences, which were sometimes very difficult and often upsetting. Their experiences form the template for this study. The interviews gave these women the opportunity to talk about subjects that are rarely discussed because they are taboo subjects in the professional and personal sphere. To talk about gender-based violence, including incidents that you have experienced personally, changes your perception of it. Talking about it is a first step towards understanding it and finding solutions to eradicate it.

Thus, whether through their specific knowledge of violence, their reflections or their recommendations for measures to be implemented in parliament to eliminate violence, the women who participated in this study have contributed to making it a tool for awareness-raising, prevention and action on sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments, in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The IPU and the APU thank them warmly for their contribution and invite parliaments to take account of and acknowledge this outstanding contribution.

The two organizations encourage parliaments to use this study to address these issues, initiate reflection and debate within their parliaments, and take action to prevent and combat this evil that is undermining efforts to achieve equality between women and men. The IPU and the APU also encourage other stakeholders – such as governments, political parties and civil society organizations – to work together with parliaments to put an end to this scourge.

Parliaments in Africa have already begun to take steps to eliminate gender-based violence and harassment in their institutions. Their example can serve as an inspiration to other parliaments and encourage them to do their utmost to provide appropriate solutions. The IPU and the APU will continue to monitor the situation closely and support parliaments in their efforts to become truly gender-sensitive, representative, inclusive and effective in a democracy that serves all.

Annexes

Study methodology

- Sample of respondents

The data for the study were collected through confidential one-on-one interviews with serving women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff in parliaments in Africa between June 2020 and June 2021. The list of 52 parliaments in Africa was compiled from the list of African Union (AU) member countries. It includes parliaments⁶² from the following five subregions: Southern Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa and North Africa.

To make the survey as representative as possible of the entire African continent, an effort was made to conduct interviews with three women parliamentarians and two female parliamentary staff from each of the 52 parliaments in Africa. Table X presents the distribution – by country and category (parliamentarian or parliamentary staff) of the 224 respondents from 50 countries and 1 subregional assembly (East African Legislative Assembly) who contributed data to the study.

- Interviews conducted

Due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted by telephone or through online communication platforms and not face-to-face at parliamentary assemblies and meetings as was the case for previous IPU studies on these issues.

The IPU and APU secretariats wrote to national and subregional parliaments in Africa and to the caucuses of women parliamentarians in those parliaments to publicize the study and encourage women in those institutions to participate. The invitations to participate included information and consent forms to ensure that participants were aware of the specific details of the research and were assured that whatever they said would remain confidential.

- Questionnaires and data collected

Participants in the Africa regional study were interviewed using standardized questionnaires – one for women parliamentarians and one for female parliamentary staff – similar to those used in the IPU-PACE Europe regional study and, in the case of women parliamentarians, to those used in the first IPU global study. The use of similar questionnaires allows for comparison of results between the different studies. Participants were asked about their experiences of different types of psychological, sexual, physical and economic violence to which they may have been exposed during their parliamentary mandate or in the course of their parliamentary work. The questions also sought information on where the violence occurred, who committed it, whether the respondents reported the incidents and why they did or did not report them. Participants were also asked about the causes of the acts of violence, their effects and solutions to prevent and remedy them.

For this third study, a few adjustments were made to the questionnaires to capture and understand in greater detail the realities already observed in the previous studies.

Thus, sexist behaviour and remarks were distinguished from remarks with a sexual connotation and dealt with in a separate question. Sexual remarks were addressed in the question on sexual harassment. A question was added to better capture acts of sextortion (requests for sexual favours) and distinguish them from sexual harassment.

Finally, the question on online sexist attacks was expanded to try to identify the most common online tactics used to harm women in parliament.

- Scope and limitations of the study results

As with previous studies, this study chooses to focus on women parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff who are most affected by gender-based violence in parliaments. It makes no attempt to compare the experiences of these women with those of their male counterparts, while recognizing that men can also be victims of such violence, which also undermines the proper functioning and inclusiveness of the parliamentary framework. Nor does the study attempt to situate violence against women in African parliaments within the broader context of violence against women in African societies in general, or compare the experiences of women in parliaments with those of women in other professional settings or in professions or occupations that until recently were exclusively or predominantly male.

Table X – List of African parliaments and participants

	MP	PO
1. Algeria	1	2
2. Angola	3	2
3. Benin	3	2
4. Botswana	3	2
5. Burkina Faso	3	0
6. Burundi	3	0
7. Cabo Verde	3	2
8. Cameroon	3	2
9. Central African Republic	3	2
10. Chad	3	2
11. Comoros	3	2
12. Congo Republic	3	2
13. Côte d'Ivoire	3	2
14. Djibouti	3	2
15. DR Congo	3	2
16. Egypt	2	0
17. Equatorial Guinea	2	1
18. Eswatini	3	2
19. Ethiopia	0	2

	MP	PO
20. Gabon	3	2
21. Gambia	1	2
22. Ghana	1	2
23. Guinea	3	2
24. Guinea-Bissau	0	0
25. Kenya	3	2
26. Lesotho	3	2
27. Liberia	2	2
28. Libya	3	1
29. Madagascar	3	2
30. Malawi	0	0
31. Mali	3	2
32. Mauritania	3	2
33. Mauritius	3	2
34. Morocco	3	1
35. Mozambique	3	2
36. Namibia	3	2
37. Niger	3	2
38. Nigeria	1	2
39. Rwanda	3	2
40. São Tomé and Príncipe	3	2
41. Senegal	3	2
42. Seychelles	3	1
43. Sierra Leone	3	2
44. Somalia	3	2
45. South Africa	3	2
46. South Sudan	2	0
47. Tanzania	2	1
48. Togo	3	2
49. Tunisia	3	2
50. Uganda	3	2
51. Zambia	3	2
52. Zimbabwe	3	2
East African Legislative Assembly (EALA)	2	0

MP = female parliamentarian

PO = female parliamentary officer

Total: 224 participants from 50 countries and 1 subregional parliamentary assembly

137 women parliamentarians from 49 countries and the East African Legislative Assembly

87 female parliamentary officers from 47 countries

35 countries provided full responses (3MP, 2PO)

Definitions used in the study

Violence against women: all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to undertake such acts, the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war.⁶³

Gender-based violence and harassment: violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, and includes sexual harassment.⁶⁴

Violence against women in politics: all acts of violence directed against women because of their gender to “discourage them from engaging in political activities and exercising their human rights, as well as to influence, restrict, or prevent their individual or collective participation in political life”.⁶⁵

Physical violence: includes a wide range of physical harm that threatens the life or physical integrity of the person concerned or their loved ones.

Sexual violence: all acts of sexual violence perpetrated against others without consent, including sexual harassment and other unwelcome acts carried out for sexual purposes (physical contact, advances, remarks with sexual connotations, or requests for sexual acts). It includes requests for sexual favours, sexual assault and rape.

Sexual harassment: any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct carried out for sexual purposes, such as physical contact and advances, remarks with sexual connotations, or requests for sexual acts, the purpose or effect of which is to violate the dignity of a person, in particular when such conduct creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Sextortion or demand for sexual favours: a situation where one person abuses his or her authority to sexually exploit another and obtain sexual favours in exchange for a benefit that he or she is empowered to withhold or confer. “Sextortion is a form of corruption in which sex, rather than money, is the currency of the bribe”.⁶⁶

Sexual assault: all acts of sexual violence against another person without consent, including rape, or coercing another person to engage in non-consensual sexual acts with another.

Psychological violence: includes all gestures, acts, words, writings and images that harm the psychological integrity of a person or group of people and that have the effect of weakening and injuring them psychologically, but also of subjugating and controlling them.

Sexist behaviour or remarks: any behaviour or remarks directed against a person because of their gender that have the purpose or effect of demeaning them and their dignity. This may include jokes or derogatory remarks about physical appearance, marital status or private life, negative

stereotyping, insults or signs of disrespect, and practices aimed at denigration or exclusion.

Psychological harassment: all insistent and intimidating behaviour, and verbal and non-verbal aggression (including acts of intimidation, attacks on reputation, attempts to isolate the person concerned, withholding of information, or assignment of tasks that do not correspond to one’s abilities or of objectives to be achieved within impossible deadlines).

Economic violence: uses economic barriers and deprivation as a means of control, most often by destroying a person’s property or putting in jeopardy their livelihood as a form of intimidation.

Notes

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- 5 Same applies as for perpetrators. The percentages provide a rough idea of the places most often cited by respondents to describe where violence takes place.
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- 28 For more details, see IPU, *Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament*, 2019.
- 29 As above.
- 30 For other examples of good practices in African parliaments, see the section on solutions, p. 20
- 31 The representation of women for the whole region can be compared, on the one hand, with Rwanda, where women make up **61.3 per cent** of parliamentarians – the highest percentage in the world – and five countries with a representation of women of more than **40 per cent**, versus six other countries with less than **10 per cent** women in their parliaments, on the other. IPU, *Monthly ranking of women in national parliament, on 1 September 2021*, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=6&year=2021>.
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